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ON PAGE A-3

NEW YORK TIMES
14 JANUARY 1980

U.S. Reassessing Nuclear Arsenal As Treaty With Soviet Languishes

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Jan. 13 — Carter Administration security aides have begun to reassess American nuclear arms programs because of the uncertain status of the strategic arms treaty. The reassessment includes the President's decision last year to build a new mobile intercontinental missile.

Officials in the Defense Department, the White House and other agencies said Mr. Carter's decision to defer Senate action on the arms treaty with Moscow, made after the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, had created new doubts about the adequacy of the Administration's nuclear plans for the 1990's.

They said Government arms experts, fearing an acceleration of Moscow's nuclear buildup, had started to examine alternatives for rapidly increasing the country's strategic arsenal in the next few years.

Specialists have also begun to question whether the Administration's proposed mobile missile, known as the MX, makes sense in an era when Moscow could substantially increase its nuclear warheads.

Would Be Driven Around

The MX rockets, which would be placed aboard large vehicles and moved around a series of roadways in the Southwest, have been designed to reduce the vulnerability of America's land-based missiles to Soviet attack. But some defense experts argue that without the new arms treaty, the MX system would soon become as vulnerable as existing land-based missiles, which are housed in underground silos.

The new treaty, which was concluded last June, would put a ceiling of 2,250 on the number of missiles and bombers each side could deploy and would limit special categories of arms, such as the number of multiple warheads that could be placed atop missiles. Officials said that in making decisions about the MX and other weapons, senior aides had assumed that the treaty would go into effect soon.

White House officials stressed that while Senate action on the treaty had been postponed, the accord could be approved later. But defense analysts acknowledged that they had been instructed by senior Pentagon aides to come up with alternatives for increasing American missile and bomber forces beyond the levels laid out in the treaty.

Concern Over Soviet Edge

The concern, they said, is that without the treaty, Moscow, which is deploying new weapons at a faster pace than the United States, could achieve a significant edge in strategic forces in the mid-1980's. Critics of the treaty have argued that the pact itself would allow the Russians to have a dangerous lead in strategic weapons in the early 1980's.

Officials said one alternative for expanding American forces was to speed up plans for building a large aircraft for carrying and launching cruise missiles. The Air Force is putting cruise missiles on B-52 bombers, but some aides are urging that a new fleet of jumbo jets, such as the Boeing 747, be used to carry as many as 75 of the low-flying drones.

Another option being considered, officials said, is to accelerate the Navy's program for building a new submarine-launched missile, known as the Trident II. There is strong support in some quarters of the Pentagon for speeding up the Trident II, because the missile could be used in pinpoint strikes against Soviet military targets.

Mr. Carter agreed on a plan for deploying 200 MX missiles last August after more than a year of debate over how best to protect land-based missiles from attack. Under the plan, each MX missile would be driven around a large, circular roadway surrounded by 23 shelters that could be used to launch the missile.

In essence, the system is designed to give Moscow more targets to shoot at than it has nuclear warheads. But some analysts maintain that without the arms treaty, Moscow might be able to put more than 20,000 warheads on its missiles in the coming decade, which they said would be more than enough to hit every MX.

As a result, a White House specialist said the Administration would probably have to look at other proposals for deploying the missile, such as putting them aboard aircraft or on a new class of submarine that would operate in coastal waters of the United States.

But a high Pentagon aide said these options had been studied in great detail and rejected as too costly or technically unfeasible. The aide said there was increasing support in the Pentagon for using antiballistic missiles to defend the mobile rocket from any Soviet attack, rather than altering existing plans for the MX.

The deployment of antiballistic missiles is severely limited by a 1972 treaty with Moscow, and several State Department officials argue that any effort to build these weapons would have profound consequences for the Soviet-American arms race. "With SALT II practically down the drain, this is hardly the time to scuttle one of the few constraints we now have on the nuclear programs of the two sides," an aide said.